

## **A Broken Promise by [paladin\\_cleric\\_mage](#) ([orphan\\_account](#))**

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** F/F, F/M, Gen, M/M, Multi, Other

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, mike x eleven - Relationship, mileven - Relationship, with nods to other ships i like

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2016-10-13

**Updated:** 2016-10-14

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 21:27:43

**Rating:** Mature

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

**Chapters:** 2

**Words:** 10,784

**Publisher:** [archiveofourown.org](#)

**Summary:**

Sunday morning Mike wakes up and realizes what he has lost.

## 1. The Vanishing of Jane Ives

The kids were quiet on the ride home from the hospital. Ted hummed along to the music on the radio. Duran Duran, then Men at Work. If it weren't for the risk of argument, Karen would smash the dial to bits. How could Ted sit there as if they were driving home from a family film? They were on the way home from the hospital after an incredibly long night which included phone calls from the police, the resurrection of a dead child, and the murder of about fifty people. Those murders happened in front of Michael. And although Nancy wasn't talking, Karen knew she had seen terrible things, too. Their children were clearly traumatized, and Ted was oblivious.

How had it all unraveled so fast?

---

Ted paid the sitter while Karen followed the kids upstairs. Nancy ducked her questions and headed towards the bathroom for a shower, her palm mysteriously wrapped in blood soaked gauze. Mike went straight into his room and shut the door. In the hall, Karen listened. First the muffled hiss of water. Then her husband thanking the sitter for putting Holly to bed and seeing her out. Most jarringly, the sound of Mike losing himself to violent, choking sobs.

Should she go in? It was tricky now that they were growing up. At Holly's age kids loved to be held. Nancy refused to be held at all. Mike had let her hold him outside the middle school, when she found him sitting in the back of an ambulance. Would he let her repeat the gesture now that there was a closed door between them? Or was it a sure sign he wanted space?

She decided on space, although it hurt to hear him that way. What had caused this? The murders that took place in the school that night? Exactly how close had he been? Was it seeing Will, one of his best friends, weak and hooked up to oxygen? Was it the girl? In the morning she would let him—and Nancy, for that matter—sleep in and miss church. She would make blueberry pancakes, then gently ask him all these questions.

“Everything alright?” Ted reached the landing.

Karen hoped he wouldn’t choose tonight to sleep upstairs. Selfishly she wanted the room to herself, especially on the off chance that Mike or Nancy would come in seeking her comfort. Ted couldn’t provide what she could, although she wasn’t exactly confident in her mothering skills at the moment. Regardless, after how he’d reacted to their children’s hurt, he deserved to sleep on the recliner.

“No, everything’s not alright. Listen. Michael’s crying.”

Ted paused long enough to hear their son grasping for steady breath. Apparently it wasn’t concerning. “He’ll be fine. You heard what the medic said, it’s all over. The boy’s back, the girl’s gone. Hawkins Energy will have to rebuild its staff, though. That might take some time.”

“Oh, who cares about Hawkins!” she snapped. “Our children went through something, Ted. Something so awful they won’t even share it with me! I don’t think Will’s return or the girl’s disappearance is going to help it.”

She swiftly passed him and headed into the bedroom, shutting herself in the master bath. Of all the mysteries this week presented her with, the greatest had to be the girl. Missing children happened, as unfortunate as it was. It wasn’t a surprise for government owned facilities to cover things up, either. But a little girl said to have put her son in danger, killed government officials? And the she, what, just fled the scene?

They hadn’t heard it from Mike. Karen rocked him back and forth while Ted spoke to the EMTs. An officer came over shortly after and brought them up to speed. Each detail he recounted caused Mike to sink a little further into her, the facts too much weight to bear.

According to the officer, the kids sought refuge in the school to protect the girl. When they were discovered, the girl—who Karen gleaned no understanding of—slaughtered as many men as she could. Then she ran. Police were scouring the floors of the building and the perimeter around the school looking for any sign of her. Nothing yet.

Karen doubted the story. The girl in the photo she had been shown earlier that day was young and meek. The idea that a child was capable of racking up a death toll seemed ridiculous. Besides, she trusted her son more than these Hawkins employees. If Mike, Dustin, and Lucas had been hiding this girl in the house all week, she couldn't be as menacing as the officials wanted her to think.

Instinct told her Mike had been hiding her. He was a friendly boy, protective and loyal to those he cared about. He must have been crying about the girl's departure, the way he had cried about Will just a few nights before. But what could have happened between them over the course of a week to warrant such a serious reaction to her leaving? Had they bonded that quickly, gone from strangers to close friends?

Before Karen went to bed she padded back down the hall and listened outside Mike's door. It was silent. Carefully she turned the knob and peered into his room. He was sprawled on top of the covers, fully dressed with his coat and shoes on. The heat of a recent cry flushed his pale skin. The Realistic radio was beside him.

---

/Goodbye, Mike./

He woke sheen with sweat and cold. Every muscle ached. Torturous dreams caused him to sleep fitfully, yet he couldn't recall them. Only the sense that he had been with someone special to him. Someone close. Intuitively he knew that he was responsible—he had failed to protect whoever it was. Where did that phantom sense of uselessness come from? What was the dream about?

Rolling over to face the bedside table, he saw the Supercom standing at attention with its antennae up. It felt like someone set his lungs on fire. He remembered what he had done.

He had lost her.

Grabbing the radio, he tumbled out of bed and sprinted down the steps. As he flew through the kitchen he caught a glimpse of Nancy and their mom, who had baby Holly on her hip. His mother hardly

had time to ask how he was before he was gone.

The basement was empty. She hadn't come home, and the fort he carefully built her the first night she spent with them remained destroyed in a pile near the door. What if she had been here, seen the mess, and assumed she wasn't welcome anymore?

He rushed into the bathroom and got sick.

---

For the next hour and a half he lay on the couch in a fetal curl, staring at the Supercom and hoping El would contact him. At noon it finally buzzed. Mike shot up and snatched it off the floor. It was Lucas, asking why he hadn't been at church that morning. He fought the urge to throw it across the room. Unless it was about finding Eleven, he didn't want to talk. Defeated, he set the radio back down, only to pick it up again when Lucas shouted his name repeatedly.

"What do you want? Over."

"Jeez, Mike. Are you okay? Over."

"No, I'm not okay. How could any of us be okay after what happened? Over."

"What do you mean after what happened? The Bad Men are dead and Will is safe. That's all that matters. Over."

"You mean you're not worried about El? Over." Mike was in disbelief.

"Why would I be? She's dead. I'm grateful she sacrificed her life for us. Over."

A thundering in his chest made the next words hard to cough up. "She's not dead, Lucas. She's just... hurt, or hiding. Over."

"Wait, you don't actually think she survived that, do you? Her eyes turned red, she broke up and fell apart. Over."

"No, she's not dead. She's too powerful to be dead. She's probably stuck in the Upside Down, waiting for us." He forgot to say over.

“Has she tried to contact you? Over.”

“No, but that doesn’t mean she’s not alive. Maybe she’s hurt bad, or she’s too exhausted to use her powers. Over.”

“Or maybe she’s dead. There was no gate last night, Mike. She didn’t go through a portal into another world. She turned to ash. How are we gonna look for someone who doesn’t even have a body? I’m telling you, she’s dead.”

“She’s not dead!” Mike shouted. In the silence of the basement he surprised himself. He sat up. “Eleven’s not dead, okay? She’s strong, and brave, and she can do anything. Like kill a Demogorgon and live to talk about it. If she talked, I mean. Point is, she put herself in danger to help the party. We went after Will, and we should go after her. We’re the only family she has. Over.”

Lucas sighed. “Look, I get it. You love her, and miss her, and we owe her. We do! But can we talk about it later? Dustin and I are meeting at the hospital in an hour to see Will. Over.”

He didn't want to go. Of course he was grateful to have Will back, but Will was okay now. El wasn't. Mike had failed to save her from the Bad Men and the monster. Worse, he had broken his promise that she would come home and have a normal life. Thinking about it made his chest hurt. Whatever energy he had should be spent figuring out how to find her. Once she was safe, they could all hang out together. Will would love Eleven, and she would feel comfortable around him. Their party would be complete once she was home.

If only he could feel her like she could feel Will and Barb.

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried. There were nothing but flashes of El screaming, crunching the monster's bones with her mind. His eyes snapped open. He needed to talk to someone who could help. Will knew what the Upside Down was like, but Mike would never bother him about it when his wounds were still so fresh. If he talked to Nancy or Jonathan they would tip off the adults. He couldn't risk that. Besides, how much could they really do? It had taken everyone—kids, teens, adults—to get Will back. Given how Eleven disappeared it would probably take twice the instinct,

knowledge, and manpower. Mike needed to talk to someone who had all that. Someone who had all that and knew what he Upside Down was like.

“Hello?” Lucas asked loudly. “Mike, are you coming? Over.”

“Do you remember what Will told us last night? About how his mom and Chief Hopper got him out of the Upside Down? Over.”

“Yeah, what’s that got to do with visiting Will? Over.”

“It doesn’t. But it might have everything to do with finding El. Over.”

“So, does this mean you’re coming or not? Over.”

“No, I’m not coming. Tell Will I’m sorry and I’ll see him as soon as I can, I just really have to talk to someone else right now. Over.”

“About what? What’s more important than seeing Will? Over.”

“Keeping my promise. Over and out.”

---

Flo called his office and said some boy was there to see him. First he thought of Jonathan, but then a little pipsqueak shouted, “Tell him it’s important!”

“Oh, God. There’s not three of them, are there?”

A knowing smile warmed Flo’s voice. “No, it’s just the one. I’ll send him back now.”

Seconds later, Mike rushed in spitting questions. Jim couldn’t tell if he was angry, distraught, or motivated—might be a combination of all three. Whatever the cause, the kid was desperate.

“Sit down,” Jim told him. Instantly Mike obliged. “How are you feeling after last night?”

“Horrible. I’m worried about El. Lucas thinks she’s dead, or if she’s not that she’s somewhere we can’t reach her. He doesn’t want to help

me look.”

Jim stared at the boy, who was perched on the edge of the seat. “You don’t think she’s dead?”

“No!” Mike scoffed. “Of course not, she’s El. She’s like, the toughest girl in the universe. Multiple universes, probably. I think she’s in trouble or hurt, but she has to be alive.”

Last night there wasn’t any time to ask the boys about their experience. There were parents at the hospital and the boys were upset and exhausted. Now he was curious. He sat back in his chair and asked, “What exactly did you see?”

Passionately, Mike explained everything. How they had been hanging out in the cafeteria waiting for Jonathan and Nancy—Jim was aggravated the teens had been bold enough to leave the kids like that—when the “bad men” arrived. El had scrambled the brains of said bad men, and they thought they were safe. Then the “Demogorgon” burst through the wall and ate the grey-haired man who wanted to take the girl. Jim made a mental note: Brenner was gone, thank God. After that, the kids ran and hid in the science classroom, but the monster found them. Eleven defeated the monster, or so they thought, but she disappeared with it.

“I mean they vanished into the air like ash,” Mike finished with a frown. “Both of them.”

“And she hasn’t come back to your house, she hasn’t tried to contact you on the radio or in the lights? Nothing weird like that?”

Mike shook his head. “That’s why I think she’s hurt, or too afraid to come home.”

“Home. Huh.”

“Yeah,” Mike continued, completely missing Jim’s interest in word choice. His mind was buzzing with its newest line of thought. “She always felt bad about stuff, you know? Like she did something wrong and thought we would get mad at her. I mean, sometimes we got mad, but it was never her fault. She always wanted to protect us, as



much as we wanted to protect her. If there's something dangerous where she is, she's probably afraid to come home in case it follows her and hurts us. She already thinks she's responsible for the Demogorgon."

"Why would she be responsible for the Demogorgon?" Jim's eyebrows raised.

"Because she opened the gate." Mike stated.

Jim leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "You came to ask for my help in finding her?"

"Well, yeah."

To lessen the blow, he adopted a hushed tone. "I can help you, but not until this all dies down. I left the hospital late last night, spent all morning at Hawkins Middle, and I'm about to head over to the Hawkins Energy Lab."

"Good! We can go into the Upside Down and bring her home!"

Will must have told his friends the story of how he and Joyce ventured into the alternate dimension together. He imagined the kid's recount: /Chief put this bag mask on my face and carried me, I was only half awake, and we had to squeeze through this squishy portal to get back. We ended up at that energy lab near Mirkwood!/. Jim didn't want them even knowing that much. Boys like these were young and foolish enough to believe that danger like this wasn't actually a threat, just some sci-fi novel come to life. For Jim, it was a waking nightmare.

How could he get Mike to back off without leading on to what he knew? Jim was already privy to the whereabouts of the girl, though he hadn't pinpointed her location yet. That would take time and resources, both of which he didn't have enough of.

The kid was hurting, though; that much was clear from the pallor of his cheeks and the way his hair was matted to one side. He'd probably bawled his eyes out and slept like hell. Jim couldn't blame him. He understood what it felt like to lose someone you love. And

kids, man, they felt everything with a much greater intensity than adults. Of course Mike was neck deep in love with Eleven. She was a pretty girl with superpowers who had saved him. He'd do anything to get her back.

Which was exactly why Jim had to stray him as far away from actually searching for her as possible. He had just brought one kid back from the dead, he wanted to make it to New Year's without resurrecting another. Even if it meant letting the girl go.

Eleven hadn't really gone, of course. Problem was Jim couldn't tell anyone, not even Joyce, what he knew or what he had done.

"It's not that easy, kid," he continued. "The town is buzzing with gossip and complaints of people seeing things, property being destroyed. We gotta put together a story explaining how your friend came back to life. It's not exactly the best time to hunt down a telekinetic twelve year old with no birth record."

"What do you mean no birth record?" Mike's face scrunched up.

Damn the porcelain skin of children and their incessant need to pick up on everything you let slip.

He sighed heavily. "You cannot repeat this to anyone. Not Will, not your other two friends, and especially not Eleven if she comes back. There's a lot she doesn't know about herself because of how she grew up. Now, I'm going to respect you and tell you a little of what I know, because I get it. You miss her. You're anxious to make sure she's safe and here I am telling you to wait. But I need you to respect me, and her, by not spreading a single word. Understand?"

Mike nodded. "Totally."

"Her real name is Jane. I visited her mother this week when we were figuring out what really goes on in the Hawkins lab. Thing is, her mother was a part of government-sanctioned experiments. She didn't know she was pregnant while they were doing the tests. When they found out, they tricked her. They took Jane from her and raised her themselves. They figured out she was telepathic and telekinetic and trained her as a weapon. But I take it you already figured that part

out.”

“I mean, we knew she was telekinetic. She can read minds too?”

“So we think.”

“That makes sense, actually.” The kid’s face brightened remembering her. “She knew who Will was without ever meeting him... She knew where he was. When Troy pushed me down and I cracked my chin, she knew someone had hurt me. And the day I jumped into the quarry, it was like she knew I was in trouble. She saved me.”

Jim was shocked. “You jumped into the quarry?”

“Yeah, but forget that. I want to hear more about El. The Bad Men, they raised her from when she was a baby?”

“From when she was a baby.”

“They did experiments on her, too?”

Jim nodded.

“Were there other kids? Did she have friends?”

“From what I saw in Hawkins Lab, she was the only one.”

“But she’s Eleven, so there must be others. Do you think they’re dead?”

“Haven’t got a clue.”

“So, she grew up alone, raised by the Bad Men.” Mike mulled it over, brown eyes flickering over the surface of Jim’s desk. Suddenly they snapped up. “Has she been in there this whole time? I mean, her whole life, being experimented on and taught how to use her powers like a weapon?”

“Yes. The night she escaped and ran into you boys was the first night she had ever set foot outside that place.”

In a snap, Mike’s eyes lost their light and welled with tears. He bit his

lower lip to hold them in. A stab of pain twisted Jim's gut. That government-sanctioned research wasn't only ruining the lives of its victims' immediate families. Secrets leaked, and rumors based on the truth spread. Anyone whose lives were touched by those stories, or by the victims themselves, were liable to be hurt. He regretted putting such a depraved truth into Mike's hands.

"She's just a girl, she doesn't deserve to live like that."

"No one does," Jim agreed.

"We have to go after her, Chief, we have to go after her now! We need to bring her home before it's too late and help her feel better and safe and happy. She can live with me, and my mom will love her, and Nancy can help her pick out clothes and I can teach her how to read and she'll go to school with me and—"

"Hey, hey, stop." He found himself standing up and rounding the desk, kneeling beside the boy's chair. "I told you, as soon as this blows over we'll start up a search and bring her back. She'll survive until then."

Tears leaked down Mike's pale freckled cheeks. "Surviving means barely making it through. I want her to be safe."

"She will be, Mike. She will be. I'm working as fast as I can to make that happen. I will come and find you when it's time for us to start looking. Until then I want you to hang on. If she contacts you, come and tell me right away. And don't do anything dangerous. Okay?"

"Okay." He sniffled.

Jim didn't believe him. The kid had jumped into the quarry and mentioned it like it was nothing. He gave Mike's shoulder a squeeze and waited for him to calm down. Then he walked him out.

---

It was Steve's idea to apologize to everyone.

Sunday evening he stopped by, actually stopped by. At the front door, to Nancy's horror, he confessed to Mrs. Wheeler that he truly liked her daughter and wanted the best, and would it be alright if

they went steady? Mrs. Wheeler was taken aback by his forwardness and bruised face. Nonetheless, his candidness was a relief. All the while Nancy was slinking around guiltily, she had imagined him to be some manipulative sleaze who only wanted her daughter's virginity. The boy before her seemed authentic, polite enough to grant an honest chance.

They left her house a little past six, equipped with a casserole and Steve's blistering need to make amends.

By the time they made it to the Byers it was past dark. Jonathan answered the door in a black tee shirt covered in flour. The smell of homemade bread, accompanied by the thump of unfamiliar rock music, filtered through the doorway and permeated the cold air. Nancy quietly adored the way he tried to hide his surprise. "Hey guys, is everything all right?"

"Yeah, man. We just want to talk." Steve half-smiled, doing his best to look unthreatening while not reopening his cracked lip. He was determined not to be an asshole anymore. The whole car ride over he had picked Nancy's brain. What do I do that makes me an asshole? No, seriously, Nance. Tell me. I need to change it.

"Sure, come on in." Jonathan stood aside, graciously inviting the pair inside. He disappeared into his bedroom to turn the stereo off.

When he came back, Steve and Nancy were standing in the middle of the living room, one transfixed by the colorful lights overhead and the other by the dilapidated state of the house. Furniture was not where it should be, blankets and papers were laying on the floor, and the carpet still smelled of gasoline and smoke.

Steve swallowed hard, and Nancy knew what he was thinking. How could the family live here, in these conditions, after everything that had happened? It was like the Byers house was haunted—not by a ghost, but by memories themselves.

"We're keeping them up for now." Jonathan gestured to the lights, then stuck his hands in his pockets, rightfully uncomfortable around the boy whose face he'd broken the day before. "In case it comes back, there'll be a warning. Stupid, I know."

"It's not stupid," Steve assured him. "Really, it's not. I would want to know, too."

Noticing how hard it was for Jonathan to believe anything that came out of Steve's mouth, she agreed. "We'll never be sure if it's gone or not. Better to be safe."

"Yeah, better to be safe."

A beat of silence prompted Nancy to offer the casserole. "My mother made this. She wanted to make things easier."

"Wow, tell her we said thank you." Jonathan took the casserole, noticing the matching bandages still wrapped around their left hands, and walked it to the kitchen. "Do you guys want anything to eat? Or drink? I can make—"

"Jonathan, I'm sorry."

He turned away from the kitchen counter and looked at Steve. The boy had apologized the night before, but it hadn't registered. They had been setting up to defeat the monster. Cautiously, Jonathan walked back into the living room.

Steve added, "I mean it, man. I know I messed up, okay? Bad. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. Please, let me get this off my chest."

The three of them sat down on the couch, Steve in the middle. He launched into an extended, flavorful recitation of his wrongs. Jealousy, antagonizing, making awful comments about Will and the whole Byers family. And especially—dear God, especially—breaking the camera. He promised to make things right however he could.

Jonathan's eyes welled. He was never approached like this. It filled him with an overwhelming mix of fear and gratitude. Was it real? Could a friendship with the girl he liked and the boy who liked her be possible? He acted tough, but he was sensitive. Too sensitive to get along with people, maybe. Aside from Will, he was so alone.

“It means a lot, Steve. Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Then an idea burst into his mind that made his eyes widen. “Hey, wanna sit with us at lunch tomorrow?”

Timidly, Jonathan dismissed it. “Oh, no, that’s alright. I don’t get along with your other friends.”

“Tommy and Carol? Screw ‘em. They’re assholes. And I’m an asshole for believing they were my friends. Let’s make our own table.”

A smile crept over Jonathan’s face. Nancy was glad to see it, knowing undoubtedly this conversation was painful. “Steve Harrington, sitting with Jonathan Byers? Are you sure you want to risk your reputation like that?”

“My friends are more important than my reputation.” Steve put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder.

“You’re serious?”

“Dead serious. What do you say?”

“Okay. Yeah, we can try that. We can try being friends.”

Nancy watched in awe as Steve took Jonathan into a tight hug.

They left shortly after that. Steve was so thankful the night’s apologies had worked in his favor. He wouldn’t stop gushing about his plans to save up and buy Jonathan a camera for Christmas. Nancy teased him. “I think you like him more than you like me.”

“What? No, no, I like you both equally.” Realizing the implication of his words he stammered, “I mean, it’s just that... Don’t get the wrong idea, okay?”

Nancy giggled. There was such simple charm to Steve. There was charm to Jonathan, too. His awkwardness, his crippling need to make sure everyone was safe. She knew they both liked her. Maybe she could take advantage of that.

“I don’t care if you like him that way, Steve. I like him, too.”

“You do?” he said excitedly. Then, pretending to be jealous, “You / do/?”

“Atonement has done wonders for you, Steve Harrington.”

He blushed, did a double take at her. His right hand found hers and their fingers laced, mindful of the bandage. “I think you’re doing wonders for me, Nancy Wheeler.”

“Oh,” she laughed. “I definitely am.”

---

That night she climbed into bed warm with hope. Even if the nightmares plagued her, she knew she wasn’t alone. Neither were Steve and Jonathan. They all had each other; trauma survivors, warriors. Together they could accomplish anything, survive anything, protect each other and the little siblings they loved.

She fell asleep with a soft smile on her face.

And woke to the sound of Mike screaming.



## 2. Half a Fortnight, Nightmares

### Summary for the Chapter:

A week of searching to no avail dampens Mike's mood.

On the second night he wakes up to her standing there, shaking.

"El, what's wrong?" He's up so fast it startles her and she takes a step back. Turning on the light beside his bed he says, "It's okay, El. Don't be scared. I just got nervous, that's all. You're not hurt or anything, right? You're okay?"

She nods.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

Uncertainly, "Dream?"

"Yeah, dream. It's those pictures you see in your head at night. Like the TV, while you sleep."

She processes this. "Yes. Bad dream."

"Here, sit down," he says, a little quieter. Aware that Nancy might wake up and tell Mom that Mike is hiding a girl in his room. That she snuck upstairs to find him.

El sits on the bed. Instinctively he tells her, "It's okay. You can get comfortable."

She stretches out, rests her head on his pillow. Mike sits down beside her, towards the foot of the bed so he doesn't totally freak her out. At first she looks uncomfortable, but when he asks if it's okay she nods. He knows El won't let him do something she doesn't like. She'll tell him or stop him herself.

"So... what happened? What was your dream about? The bad people?"

She nods.

“What did they do to you?”

“Bath.”

Mike furrows his brow, imagining El being held down underwater, drowning. But El isn't dead, so that can't be what she means. It must be something else. Maybe she doesn't have the words to describe it.

“They hurt you?”

She shakes her head.

“Oh. Then what did they do to you? What was the bath for?”

“Upside down.”

They put El upside down in a bathtub? So they were drowning her? Who were these bad people anyway, and why did they hurt El? The longer he thinks about it, the more upsetting it is. And the less it makes sense.

“I'm sorry you had a bad dream, El.” Unconsciously, his fingers inch towards her shin. A quiet urge to comfort her that he is never sure enough to act on. “I wish you could tell me what you're thinking, you know? What you've been through. That way I could know you more. And plus, I always feel better when I talk to my friends. I bet you'd feel better, too.” He watches her face for a hint of expression. She studies him right back. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

She nods.

“You just don't know how to tell me.”

“The words... They're here.” She taps her head, then motions to her mouth and shrugs.

“But you don't know how to make them come out.”

She nods fervently.

“The bad people, did they let you talk a lot? In the place you came from?”

“No. Too afraid.”

“You were too afraid to talk?”

She doesn't nod, but Mike knows he's right. He can always feel the truth with her, even if he doesn't want it. The truth about Eleven hurts. There are things he can't protect her from. Or couldn't, things that already were.

“Well, I'm always going to be here for you, El. Okay? Whenever you want to talk. I'll listen.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He smiles and her face brightens. “I'll sleep on the top bunk tonight. You can stay here. Let me just lock the door in case my mom comes in to wake me up for school. That'll give you time to hide.”

Her eyes flick to the closet, terrified. As he crosses the room to lock the door he tells her, “I know you don't like it. I don't like it either. It would only be for a minute until my mom went away. It probably won't happen, but, you know, just in case. To keep you safe. It'll be alright.”

She nods apprehensively. He helps her get under the blankets and brings them up under her chin, like does with Holly when Mom needs help.

“El?”

“Yes?”

“I like having you here.”

Slowly, she smiles. “Me, too.”

He ascends onto the bunk and peeks over the edge. “Well, night El.”

“Night Mike.”

---

Monday at lunch, Lucas slammed his tray onto the table in excitement. “Man, I can’t wait to tell Will about this!”

“Everyone’s wondering how we did it.” Dustin smiled, peeling open a pint of milk.

“The hole in the wall that’s got the hallway blocked off.”

“The shadow that’s singed onto Mr. Clarke’s chalkboard.”

“The fact that Will’s alive again.”

“The girl who broke Troy’s arm.”

“He is gonna blow his shit,” Lucas laughed. “You’re coming tonight, right Mike?”

Mike was frowning absently into his plate of Roman Holiday, plastic fork propped idly in his hand. The sound of his name parted the fog of students chattering around them. “What?”

“To see Will,” Dustin repeated, taking a bite. “Today, after school. Are you coming?”

“Yeah, I’ll come.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes. “Do you even care, Mike? Cause it doesn’t sound like you do.”

“Of course he cares,” Dustin quietly defended.

“Then why is he acting like this? Look at him. Mike. Mike. Mike!”

He responded numbly, still looking at his tray. “Yeah?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Lucas searched for a hint of his best friend.

“Nothing, I’m tired.”

“Are you having nightmares? I had one last night, about that woman who was aiming a gun at us. You know, the one who got her brains scrambled by Eleven.”

Dustin being lighthearted about it did nothing to cheer him up. A sleepless night had stripped him of energy. That much was true. His exhaustion was exasperated by the conversation with Chief Hopper. Mike understood the risk of looking for Eleven alone, and why the chief wanted to wait until the buzz died down. If the middle schoolers were whispering and pointing at them, he could imagine what the adults were gossiping about. He even trusted that Chief Hopper would start up a search as soon as he could.

Problem was, Eleven couldn't wait that long.

“Well? What's going on?” Dustin prodded.

Mike looked up at them. “I talked to Chief Hopper yesterday.”

“You did? You went to the station?” Lucas dropped his fork and leaned forward.

“I asked him about El.”

Dustin's brows raised. “And? What'd he say? Does he know where she is?”

“He doesn't know where she is, but he says he's going to start up a search as soon as the town stops talking.”

“Oh, man. I can't wait.” Dustin's gummy grin said he knew there was another adventure on the horizon.

“Exactly,” Mike said gravely. “We can't wait. I told him that, how El needs our help now. He wants us to be patient, not do anything dangerous. But how can I sit here acting like everything's normal when she's out there suffering?”

“I told you, Mike,” Lucas rolled his eyes. “She's not suffering, she's—”

“Dead? Yeah, you said that a million times, but it doesn't make a difference. I think she's alive and so does Chief Hopper.”

“Dustin, would you please tell him he’s crazy? And apparently Chief Hopper is, too.”

“Actually, Lucas, I think you’re the mental one in this situation. Think about it—El definitely could have survived. First of all, she probably has tons of powers we don’t know about, and second, she’s the flea.”

“The flea? How is she the flea?”

“She disappeared into thin air with the Demogorgon, didn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“So, the Demogorgon was a flea, too. Opening gates wherever it wants to, sealing them up after it gets its prey. Maybe El went with it or transported herself. Either way, flea.”

Lucas threw up his arms. “I can’t believe this.”

“Believe what? That Mike is right? That our friend with superpowers, who maybe you forgot, saved us and Will, could still be alive? She deserves more than to be left out there, wherever she is. She deserves to be looked for.”

Finally there was a hint of a smile on Mike’s face. Someone else was sticking up for Eleven. To Dustin he said, “The gate is still open at Hawkins Energy. Chief Hopper was talking about going over there. He must have jurisdiction over it now that all those people who ran the lab are dead. We can go tonight, sneak in.”

“Wait, you’re not actually suggesting we sneak out tonight and go into the Upside Down?”

“Why not?” Mike shrugged.

“We? Hold on,” Dustin was laughing now. “Lucas, you heard yourself, right? You just said ‘we’. So you admit it’s possible she’s still alive?”

Lucas folded his arms over his chest. “It’s possible. But I don’t think we should go straight to the gate. We don’t even know if she’s in

there.”

“So what do you think we should do?” Mike asked.

“We should contact her. Have you tried?”

Dustin spooned up macaroni. “More importantly, has she tried?”

“I’ve tried, but nothing’s happened. If she’s tried it hasn’t worked.”

“Well, maybe you need to try something else,” Lucas suggested, picking up his fork and returning to his lunch.

“Or someone else. Have you forgotten the one person who knows the most about the Upside Down?”

Mike and Lucas glanced at each other dumbly. “El?”

“Seriously, how are you guys this dense? Will was in the Upside Down for an entire week. He’ll know what it feels like to contact and be contacted. After school, we tell him.”

---

The ideas they conjured ranged from manageable to entirely reckless. Will listened raptly, absorbing the vibrant brainstorm with doe eyes. His interjections were sparse—questions and a few eager nods. Dustin and Lucas had the best ideas. Little modifications like hanging lights up in the Wheeler basement, and keeping their Supercoms with them at all times.

Larger ideas were doable, if the boys were careful. The Heathkit had been removed after the fire, but Mr. Clarke had put another radio in its place. During lunch the boys would check it and use it to talk to Eleven. It might not pick up signals from the Upside Down, but anything was worth a try. Will knew more than anyone how the voice of his mother had warmed him in that freezing world.

Then there were the biggest ideas. The reckless ones. Like sneaking into Hawkins Lab to find the gate. Luckily they had talked Mike out of it, at least for now. Stubborn, he pushed for another risky idea. Going into the woods. Eleven had stayed in the woods the night after

Mike and Lucas's fight. If she'd survived killing the Demogoron and somehow made it back to Hawkins, she could be hiding out in the trees.

It was a reach. Everyone knew it but Mike. They'd agreed to help Eleven, though, so they kept their mouths shut. They couldn't back down unless something bad happened. Hopefully it wouldn't. Then again, this was Hawkins, and everything bad seemed to be piling down upon them with the brunt of winter.

Will called for Dustin as they started to leave. He told Mike and Lucas he'd catch up with them outside at the bike rack. When he doubled back to the hospital bed he read the look of concern spilled on Will's pale face.

"What's wrong?"

It took a moment for Will to cough it up. "I'm worried about Mike."

Dustin frowned. "Me, too."

"I'm not saying she's dead," he immediately covered up, as if Mike were outside listening, and would condemn him for blasphemy. Eleven was his religion. That was part of the crux. "She's probably alive, it's just that—"

"He's taking this really hard. Having nightmares, wearing the same outfit Eleven wore the first few days she was here... But he's right, at least for now. We should be looking. Until something shows us otherwise." Will anxiously fingered the oxygen tube still hooked around his face. Dustin tried to cheer him up. "Just think, it'll be out by Wednesday."

"I know, but then I have to wait until Friday to go home."

"They want to make sure you're breathing okay on your own. Makes sense. You're a pretty special case."

Will nodded. "I just want to get home before Mike does anything stupid. Looking is fine, but some of the ideas he has are dangerous."

"Maybe it'll all pay off when she's home. Then you'll get to meet her. You'll have a lot to talk about, seeing as you both lived in the Upside



Down and survived the Demogorgon.”

“I thought you said she doesn’t talk?”

“Hardly, but she’s a good listener.”

Will put his hand back on the bed, thinking about the girl who had grown up like a lab rat, barely human. The girl who could read minds and destroy things without ever touching them. She had destroyed the faceless monster that strung him onto the wall with slime. Even if she survived and made it back, what would she be like? Would the monster follow her back from the Upside Down? And would Mike, too wrapped up in his own thoughts, be able to keep himself safe from the hurt she carried?

He started to feel dizzy.

“I don’t think going back into the woods is a good idea.”

Dustin nodded. “We’ll be together, though. And hey, if the Demogorgon is really gone, we have nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t know,” Will said doubtfully.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

He started to press Will for more, when the Supercom buzzed in his backpack. The suddenness startled him into nausea. It felt like there was a living thing inside his belly that was itching to come up.

Lucas urged Dustin to hurry up. He and Mike were impatient to visit the woods before it got dark. If they were home past dark their parents would kill them.

“Alright, I’m coming!” Dustin called into the radio before stuffing it back into his bag. He noticed Will studying him nervously. “It’ll be okay. If we survived Saturday night, we can survive anything. Besides, I’ll be there to protect them.”

That earned a small smile from Will, who was trying not to act weak.

Was it their conversation that had stirred up his guts? He felt happy when they entered, but now he felt sick. And it wasn't the type of sick where he was going to throw up. It was a nameless, squishy feeling like yogurt and acid and itching. Itching to come up.

As soon as Dustin left the room he started to cough.

---

Pushing his bike through the woods, Dustin shivered from more than just the cold. The last time they had traipsed around, Troy and his buddy found them and chased them all the way to the quarry with an open switchblade.

Tonight they were there for Eleven. He would need to remind himself of that more than once.

Lucas paused, bike resting against his hip, binoculars pressed to his face. His orange jacket blended in with the colors of autumn. Burnt colors covered the floor of the forest, crunched like brittle bones beneath their feet. "What are we even looking for?"

"Anything. Human, monster, a trace of something." Mike was scanning the bare tree trunks. Every so often he shouted out her name. Never any response.

The sun began to set quickly, it being mid-November. Dustin was still feeling the chill of his conversation with Will earlier. "Maybe we should head back."

"Not yet. We can look a little more."

"Okay, Mike, but if I'm not back by six..."

"I know. I'll take the blame."

"How bout you just work on the next campaign instead," he muttered. Lucas caught the comment and grinned. Their adventure to find Will was a wild ride. Now, with Will finally safe and the reality of what they'd done looming over them, it wasn't just fun anymore. Dealing with other universes was a serious responsibility they weren't ready for.

Dustin wanted to help Eleven, and see her home safe. He wasn't sure he wanted it at the expense of his own life. Later, when Mike wasn't around, he would share with Lucas how he was feeling. At least Lucas wouldn't judge him for being afraid, especially so early into the hunt, when hours before he had defended Eleven's life. Lucas was always concrete and rationale, so Dustin's change of heart from being in the woods would make sense. Lucas would be happy to have someone on his side, two against one with Mike.

This is for Eleven, he stopped to remind himself. We won't give up yet.

Twenty more minutes of searching, pushing their bikes over roots and twigs, gleaned nothing. They'd gone in a big arc, like a boomerang, scouting out a select area of the forest. The same area they'd been walking in before Troy found them. A central location between Mirkwood, the quarry, and town. There was no sign of human life.

Then Mike's voice cracked through the silence. "Hey! I found something!"

Desperation laced his words and brought Lucas and Dustin running towards him. The pair stood shoulder to shoulder as Mike dropped to his knees into the leaves and scooped up the empty Eggos boxes. They were wilted from a week in the woods, bitten by the frost of morning and dried by the sun.

"Mike, those must be from last week," Dustin said carefully. "Remember the grocery store?"

Incredulous, Mike looked up at them. "It could be from this week. It's just been really damp."

Lucas shook his head. "No, Mike. They're not fresh. She's not here. Come on, we need to go home."

"But she has to be out there somewhere."

"Yeah, somewhere. Not here." Lucas offered Mike a hand to help him up.

They hurried back to the main road as the sun set, plugging along as fast as they could without completely leaving Mike behind. He was sulking, lagging. Dustin glanced over his shoulder at the poor kid, completely missing the log in front of him. He fell one way as the bike he'd been pushing fell the other. Whatever he tripped over had dug into his left shin. He sat for a minute rubbing the spot.

"What is it?" Lucas wondered.

That piqued Mike's curiosity. He rolled his bike to where they were. An old, hollowed out log sat no more than a foot away from a small wooden box. It had a little brass hinge, but no lock. Lucas crouched down to open it as Dustin and Mike looked on. There was nothing inside.

"Mental," Dustin whispered.

"Maybe it's like a messenger box. Let's put something in it. We can check tomorrow and see if it's still there."

"What, you think Eleven is checking this box every day? Just when I think you're okay, I remember that you've gone out of your mind." Lucas gripped the bike handles and pushed on. "Leave something if you want, but I'm not coming back out here to check. We'll look somewhere else tomorrow, or try contacting her another way."

At least he wasn't giving up yet. And if he wasn't Dustin couldn't. The box was strange, but there was no way it had anything to do with Eleven. Why would it? She didn't come from these woods, she came from Hawkins Energy Lab, which was at least a half mile away.

"Probably a hunter," Dustin said, standing up to brush himself off. Bits of leaves clung to his clothes. "A place to stash ammo or something. Who knows?"

"Ready, Mike?"

After a moment staring at the box: "Yeah, ready."

Dustin could tell Mike was plotting. He hadn't left anything today, but he would come back and leave something tomorrow. And check it the next day, and the next. If and when Lucas and Dustin backed

off this whole operation, Mike wouldn't. That much was clear. Will's energy could either help or hurt Mike, depending on which side he took. If Will's nervousness at the hospital meant anything, hopefully he would talk Mike down.

For a second Dustin wished none of it had happened. Fun as it was to play sci-fi action nerds for a week, it had put a wedge in their friend group, changed Mike's demeanor and destroyed Will's health.

Maybe Eleven was cool, but it was possible their life before all this was cooler.

Regardless, he didn't have a good feeling about this.

---

That Friday Jonathan rushed to his car after school. Tonight would be Will's first night back; their mother was going to pick him up right after work. They were excited, of course, but completely unprepared. The house was in a state of deterioration, and Jonathan had done nothing all week to repair it. How could he have, when they all skipped school to attend Barb's funeral Wednesday afternoon?

From three cars down, Steve watched him struggle with his keys. "Hey! Where are you going? I thought you were gonna watch the game with me and Nance?"

As glad as he was to have friends, he couldn't be bothered now. He was anxious to get a head start on fixing up. "I can't. My brother's being released tonight and the house is still a disaster. I've been slacking off all week, and now I need to try to put it back together."

Steve cocked his head, his ridiculous bangs swishing. "You can't do it by yourself."

"What?"

"We'll help." He tossed his chin towards Nancy, who was walking up the slope that led to the student parking lot. A pale blue sweater peeked out from underneath a sharp brown jacket. Delicate curls framed her face. Her necklace, the one with the ballerina slippers, glinted in the autumn sun.

This was the girl who held Steve at gunpoint.

“How was your day?” He took her bag and the books she was carrying.

“You know how my day was, Steve. You saw me at lunch.” Seeing Jonathan a few cars over she waved. “Hey, how’s it going?”

He grinned, glad to be noticed by her. “You saw me at lunch, too.”

Steve rubbed Nancy’s shoulder. “I think we have to skip the game tonight.”

“What, why?”

“Will’s coming home and Jonathan needs help with the house.”

“Of course, how did I forget? What time are you expecting him?”

“Around seven or eight. We don’t have much time.”

“Four hours?” Steve said arrogantly. “Please, we can do anything in four hours.”

---

By six o’clock he and Steve had pried up the hallway carpet and hauled it outside. Nancy was acting as interior designer, pushing furniture back into its rightful spot, pulling the lamps out of Mrs. Byer’s room and plugging them back into their original sockets throughout the house. She helped gather trash and reorganize things like photographs and blankets that were strewn about. The trio even did their best to dress up the boards covering the hole Mrs. Byers had axed through the wall, draping an extra string of lights over the area.

Finally they sat down at the kitchen table to catch their breath. Jonathan offered them leftovers from the night before. Gratefully, they tucked into the cold meal. Steve ate like a hound, while Jonathan watched the clock, wondering when Will would be home. It was exciting, no doubt. At the same time he wondered how the Upside Down changed his brother. Would being at home scare him, since the Upside Down looked just like it? And would he help the

boys in their search for Eleven?

Will had started to say something about it yesterday when Jonathan visited him after school. He had quickly shut up, like it was a secret. There were never any secrets between them. Something potentially dangerous was going on. He needed to know. If Will hadn't told him, it wasn't likely that Mike had told Nancy. But it never hurt to ask.

"Hey, has your brother been acting weird this week?"

Steve snorted into his glass of milk. "That kid is always acting weird."

"Shut up!" She elbowed him playfully. To Jonathan, "He's been wearing the same outfit all week, those grey sweats with the navy pullover. And he's having nightmares. Why?"

"At the hospital Will mentioned finding Eleven. Has Mike been looking for her?"

Nancy shrugged, setting her spoon down. "The other night after dinner we were talking. He mentioned wanting to find her, but I didn't think much of it. Eleven going missing isn't the same as Will."

"Right. He hasn't done anything reckless, though, has he?"

"I don't think so. Lucas and Dustin have been over almost every night this week. They go down to the basement, same as always. I went down once, on Wednesday. They were talking into their radios with that game board flipped over so the black side was up. And there was a little fort made out of sheets, I think that was where Eleven slept."

"He still has it up?" Steve said with a full mouth.

"Yeah. So I guess they are looking for her."

"This isn't good, guys," he told them. "Will is going to want to help, and they'll want him to since he knows the Upside Down."

Steve took a gulp of milk and set the glass on the table. "That Hawkins Energy place you talked about, it's still open, right? The state hasn't come to reclaim it yet, that main gate your mom and Chief Hopper used could still be open?"

Nancy's eyes lit up. "They'll try to go through it."

"We have to stop them," Jonathan nodded.

"But how? My brother liked her. And you know them, when they have a mission, they'll do anything. They'll spend ten hours playing that dumb game—"

"Dungeons and Dragons. It's not dumb, but I agree. They'll do anything. We need to talk them down."

"Why don't we just help them look?" Steve offered.

They glared at him.

"What? You guys jumped in to help when it was Will and Barb."

"Right, my brother. And her best friend. My brother's safe now. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Me, too." Nancy and Jonathan shared an intimate glance.

"What should we do?" Jonathan asked.

"I'll talk to Mike when I get home."

"And I'll talk to Will."

"We can't lose them," Nancy urged.

"I know," he reached across the table and set a hand on top of hers.

"We won't."

Steve's fork stalled halfway to his mouth.

---

Again, Nancy woke to her brother screaming.

She bolted to his room, thinking of the monster, thinking of Will. Never would she be naïve enough to believe that thing had truly died. They had watched it burn alive after being shot and impaled, yet it managed to evade them and bust a gate open at the middle



school. If she lost Mike the way Jonathan lost Will, she would lose all composure. What were the chances they could raise a boy from the dead twice?

She let out a sigh of relief as she flicked on the light. It was just another nightmare. Her panicked haste was warranted; she wasn't merely an older sister now, but the proud survivor of a traumatic incident. One that transcended the previously assumed rules of reality. No science textbook had prepared her for monster hunting with Jonathan Byers.

Admittedly, Mike wasn't the only one having bad dreams.

She closed the bedroom door behind her and walked to his bed. Like watching an insect beat itself against a windowpane, she watched her brother writhe in anguish. Screams were half muffled against the pillow, mingled with mumbles and pained yelps. He was crying out for—was he really crying out her name? And "let her go, let her go!"

It was about Eleven. Not the monster, not the murders he witnessed, or the (fake) funeral of one of his best friends. They were about a girl he'd known for a week.

The longer she watched the more she resented that Eleven had come into their lives and stirred them up. Surely it was no coincidence she arrived at the same time as the monster. Yet her brother wasn't concerned about the intensity of that connection. If anything, he reveled in it. What had happened between them in that week, to attach them as if their presence or lack thereof was the difference between life and death?

Even she and Jonathan weren't bound the way he was to Eleven. They were close—maybe in a different way than her brother and Eleven would ever be—but the trauma hadn't made them inseparable. Closer than they'd been, sure. She and Steve were closer, too. Closer than they had been before any of this impossible madness had twisted up the normalcy she enjoyed. Books, studies, friends, cute boys. Pretty things and laughter. The monster and the girl (were they, could they be, the same thing?) had lifted normalcy like a house in a tornado and thrown it, splintering, to the ground. Selfishly, for her and Mike and the two idiot boys in her life, wished it hadn't. For Barb, she wished it hadn't.

A whole week, and getting worse.

How long would Eleven's ghost stay with them?

Of course, Mike could never know she thought this.

---

Upon first gasping inhale he tasted his heartbeat.

Nancy was sitting on his bed, shaking his shoulder. He swatted her away and sat up to catch his breath. He couldn't. The dream left him with empty lungs, turned air to poison, breeding a slow burn that would erase him like the weight of missing her.

Eleven was on a steel gurney in a room walled in white tile. A thin hospital gown caught on the side of the table and ripped as she struggled to break free from leather shackles. Attached to her skull was a contraption meant to measure brainwaves. She was screaming, bleeding, horrified. They were coming for her, with instruments designed to flay skin and muscle off bones in strips that would be fed to dogs, crunched between teeth and tongue.

Upon next breath he tasted tears.

Waking was an extension of the nightmare. He knew that every second she spent away from him was a second spent unsafe.

"You had another bad dream." Nancy watched sympathetically as Mike's labored breathing slowly steadied. "How many have you had? And don't lie."

Friends don't lie.

But Nancy wasn't his friend. She didn't need to know that tonight made one every night since Sunday. It had been almost a week, and despite the relief of having Will back, a tension sat heavy on his chest, threatening to suffocate him. Getting up for school, eating breakfast, and acting himself were enough to exhaust him. At night he laid down expended, inevitably jumping awake some hours later, covered in sweat. Nancy only heard him on the nights he screamed. The other nights, he cried himself back to sleep.

Of course, she didn't need to know that.

"This is only the second." He wiped his eyes and saw her frown. "I'm fine, really."

"Are you?" Her brows cinched with concern. "Because you were calling her name."

"Oh." He looked down, embarrassed.

"We know you're looking for her," she said softly.

"We?"

"The other day at the hospital Will almost let something slip to Jonathan. And I saw you guys in the basement, huddled around the radio with your game board upside down. Lucas and Dustin have been over every night this week, and I know it's not for a campaign."

"You're right, it's not. But so what? Eleven needs help."

Did he need to explain it again? Weren't his actions self-explanatory? Friend goes missing, look for friend. They did it for Will, Nancy did it for Barb, they should do it for El. Why was he the only one who seemed to think so? Dustin and Lucas were helping, but Mike knew they would back out if they didn't hear from her, or if the stakes got too high. In the woods Dustin had been spooked; Mike knew by the intense look in his blue eyes. Hopefully Will, who had also agreed to help however he could, was genuine.

"She might need help, but that's what Chief Hopper is there for. He told me about it when he came to talk about bringing Barb's body back. We can't get ourselves involved anymore."

"You're just saying that because you're scared and Barb's dead."

"What?" She recoiled from him, hurt.

"Now that Barb's dead and Will's in the hospital, you're scared. Scared of what the Upside Down is really like, and what's in it. You don't want us looking for Eleven because you don't want anyone else to get hurt. And you won't help, either. You just want to go back to

your normal life.”

She swallowed. “It’s not like that.”

“Yeah? Then what’s it like? You were brave enough to take on the Demogorgon with Jonathan. That was for Will and Barb. What about Eleven?”

“Have you guys even heard from her?”

“No, but so what?”

“Mike, if she was still alive, she would have contacted you by now. Don’t you think?”

The corner of his mouth twitched in a half-frown. “Well, yeah, but maybe she’s hurt. If we keep trying, she’ll hear us. She’ll know we’re looking for her and it’ll give her strength. Like with Will.”

“Give it a rest. If she’s out there, she’ll find a way back. Chief Hopper will look for her. And if he doesn’t find her, then I’m sorry. We can’t save everyone, and we can’t lose you trying.”

Mike glared at her, jaw set.

“I’m not saying you can’t miss her.” She reached out to squeeze his arm. He jerked away. “You’re allowed to miss her, Okay?”

Something tickled his cheek. Another tear. They betrayed him, continued to fall as his anger compounded the pain. He roughly wiped them away. “I want to go back to sleep.”

“I’m right next door. If you need anything, come get me. Okay?” He didn’t answer. She stood and crossed the room, pausing at the door. “Just remember, Mike—it’s not still happening.”

He watched her go and thought, That’s it. That’s the problem.

El.

She was not still happening.

---

Seeking comfort, he tread lightly down to the basement, Supercom in hand. He had rebuilt the fort earlier in the week, and visited it regularly. As if him being near her sleeping bag would raise her from the shadows.

He sat down in the fort. Doubt, like leeches clinging to his milk-pale skin, sucked away at his hope. Maybe Lucas had been right in the first place. Maybe she was dead, or she had made it back to the Upside Down and was now cocooned in goo, hanging from the walls like Will was before his mom and Chief Hopper rescued him.

Regardless, there was a kernel of doubt that Eleven would ever come home. Mike was going to have to let her go.

But how could he? More so, how could anyone expect him to? El wasn't just a friend, like she was to Dustin and Lucas. She was everything—an entity that possessed all realms of time, space, and spirit. A little girl who needed to be loved.

Screw being rational about this. He couldn't afford to believe she was dead. It would ruin him, as if uncertainty hadn't already done the trick. Eleven couldn't afford it either. If there was any chance she was alive and Mike ignored it, he would be sentencing her to death.

Laying down in the cozy space, lit by one dim nightlight, Mike spoke to her. "Where are you, El? Are you alive? We've been trying to contact you all week and we haven't heard anything. Lucas and Dustin are almost ready to give up, I can feel it. But I don't want to give up on you. I made a promise to you, El. So please, tell me where you are."

Absently, his fingertips traced the outline of the radio. It remained silent, like it had every time he tried talking to her. He hoped she could hear him, or feel him. Now that he knew she could read people's thoughts, he wondered if speaking out loud made a difference to her. In a weird way, it soothed him. Especially talking to her when Lucas and Dustin weren't around.

Finally calm enough to get comfortable, he snuggled into the sleeping bag. To Eleven he said, "You don't have to come home yet. I'll wait

for you, I promise. Just tell me you're alive.”

He fell asleep with the radio cradled in his hands, in case she spoke back.

It was his first night without any nightmares.